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Descent into Hades – Resurrection, 1320. Pech Patriarchate, Serbia.

# CHRIST, THE MEDICINE OF LIFE:

## The Syriac Fathers on the Lord's Descent Into Hell

Presently working on her D. Phil. at Oxford University, England, Russian Orthodox Syriac scholar Irina Kukota delves into the writings of the Syriac fathers on the Lord's descent into hell, the Church's traditional teaching on the afterlife, and the effects of contemporary Christian eschatology. With clear insight and warm faith, Irina compounds the spiritual wealth of the patristic East into an accessible and healing balm for the soul.

RTE: Irina, your work is quite intriguing because most of us don't often think of the implications of the Lord's descent into hell. Can you summarize the tradition for us? I'm sure it is much richer than the passing thought most of us give it during the Paschal services.

IRINA: Yes, this is absolutely true. How many times during Easter liturgy do we hear that Christ descended into Hades (the Greek word for the underworld) and broke "the gates of bronze and the bars of iron." Even after Easter and Pentecost, for example, during liturgy on the Feast of All Saints, we sing this in services. So, it is true that we hear about the descent often, but I've noticed that many people have difficulty explaining why.

The tradition of Christ's descent into hell (*Hades* in Greek, *Sheol* in Syriac) is an ancient one and it had a very profound meaning for early Christians. We can find early references to the descent already in the gospels and epistles. The basic text for the tradition is from the first epistle of St. Peter:

*For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also He went and made a*

*proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah... (I Peter 3:18-20)*

*But they will have to give an accounting to Him who stands ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does. (I Peter 4:6)*

Other texts connected with the descent are Rom. 10:6-7<sup>1</sup>, Col. 1:18<sup>2</sup>, Eph. 4:7-10<sup>3</sup>, and Mt. 27:51-53<sup>4</sup>. Also, we should mention two texts to which the tradition of Christ breaking the gates of brass and the bars of iron owes its origin: Psalm 106/7:15-16<sup>5</sup> and Psalm 23/24:7-10<sup>6</sup>.

Some modern western scholars argue that this passage in I Peter is not at all about the descent into Hades. However, both eastern and western fathers refer to it in their writings. There is further evidence that lays to rest scholarly doubts: if one looks at the *Peshitta*, the Bible in Syriac, one reads there that Christ descended to Sheol. Thus, I Peter 3:19 reads:

*And He preached to these souls who were kept closed in Sheol, those who previously had been disobedient in the days of Noah.*

In investigating the Syriac tradition, you see a textual tradition forming as early as the second century, developing Biblical passages favouring the interpretation of Christ's descent into Sheol.

1 Rom. 10:6-7: *But the righteousness that comes from faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'"*

2 Col. 1:18: *He is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He might come to have first place in everything.*

3 Eph. 4:7-10: *But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, "When He ascended on high He made captivity itself a captive; He gave gifts to His people." When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that He had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.*

4 Mt. 27:51-53: *At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After His resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.*

5 Psalm 106/107:15-16: *Let them thank the LORD for His steadfast love, for His wonderful works to humankind. For He shatters the doors of bronze, and cuts in two the bars of iron.*

6 Ps. 23/24:7-10: *Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. Who is the King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, He is the King of glory.*

RTE: What led you to the Syriac tradition, and why did you choose the Syriac fathers as the focus of your studies?

IRINA: Syriac is the eastern dialect of Aramaic, the language spoken by our Lord Himself, and I wanted to read the Gospel in this language to be able to perceive how the words of Christ sounded. And of course, the meaning of some obscure passages becomes much clearer if you read them in the original.

I did not become attracted to the Syriac fathers right away, although certainly, I knew a little about St. Ephrem the Syrian and St. Isaac the Syrian, as they are very honoured saints in the Orthodox tradition. However, as I went on, I grew more and more fascinated with the Syriac tradition, partly because the Syriac fathers tend to be poetic, rather than rational and logical in their approach. This does not mean that they are illogical, but their logic is based on an inner association, born out of prayer and the knowledge of God. It allows one to see deep connections between biblical passages, church dogmas, and the world around us. You may have already noticed how closely packed their writings are with symbolism and theological insight. I was amazed to discover an inner cohesion between the biblical narratives that I had never previously suspected.

We still know very little about the Syriac tradition, which is a stimulus to learn and discover more about it. Not only do the Syriac fathers explicitly refer to the biblical sources, but the theme of the descent is central to the theology of the Syrian Church, and the link between the incarnation of Christ and His descent into Sheol is expressed more strongly here than anywhere else.

Syriac Christians preserved ancient Judaic notions of *Sheol* (or Hades) as a designation of sin, illness, ignorance, darkness, and utter forsakenness by God, and in their homilies these notions are bound very closely together. In Judaism, God does not reach Sheol, so souls there live in oblivion; death reigns over both sinners and righteous with no distinction between them. Thus, in descending to Sheol, Christ showed His utmost compassion towards



*Irina Kukota*

humanity as well as His divinity. According to the Syriac tradition, the mystery of the incarnation is expressed in the succession of Christ's descents: His descent into a body (incarnation itself), His descent into the Jordan (the baptism and sanctification of the waters which, in the Syrian tradition, represent the power of chaos and death and are also associated with Hades), and His descent into Sheol, where Christ recovers Adam, the first man.

However, in reading the Syriac fathers, it is not always clear precisely who Christ led out of Sheol. In Syriac, as in Hebrew, the word Adam can designate either the first man or humanity as a whole, as a generic notion. This dual usage generated two views on who was taken by Christ to Paradise after His descent. Authors such as St. Ephrem the Syrian hold that Christ has taken all who sojourned in Hades with Him to Paradise, while other authors, like Aphrahat, insist that He took only Adam, Eve, and the righteous with Him.

So, the descent into Sheol is viewed as a pinnacle of salvation in the Syrian tradition. Christ defeats death (and thereby the sin through which death entered into the world), thus liberating all of humanity from darkness, slavery to sin, and death, bringing salvation and illumination to the entire human race.

I was very touched when I first read these lines about Christ's descent in the poem of Jacob of Serugh<sup>7</sup>:

He went down to the sea of the dead to be baptized like  
Those who bathe;  
He brought up from thence the pearl, Adam, depicted in His own image.

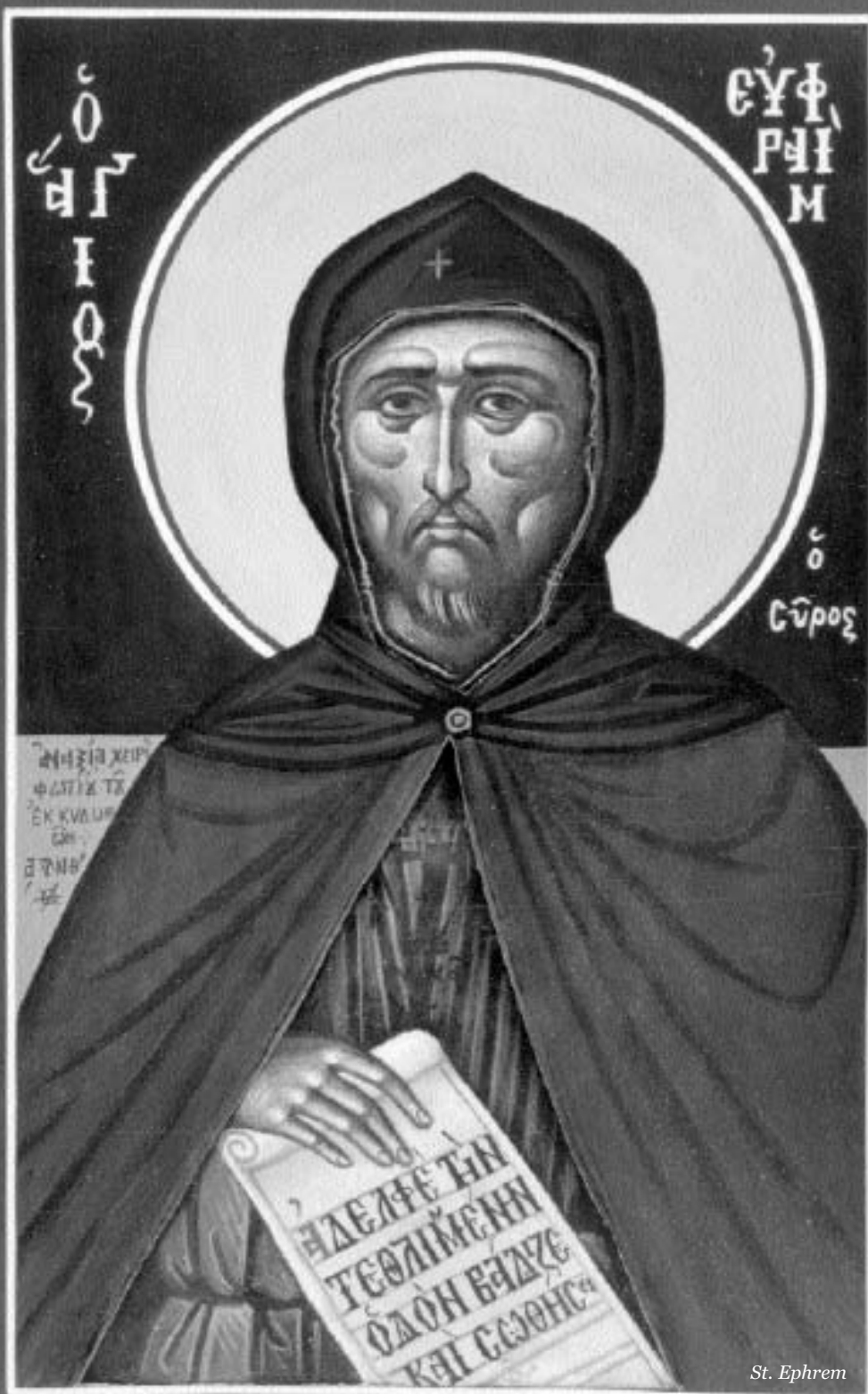
St. Ephrem the Syrian, the poetic genius of the Syrians, mentions the descent of Christ into Sheol in his Hymns on the Resurrection 1:8, 14-15:

From on high He came down as Lord,  
From the womb He came forth as a servant  
Death knelt before Him in Sheol,  
And Life worshipped Him in His resurrection.  
Blessed is His victory! ...

He did not shrink from the unclean,  
He did not turn away from sinners,  
In the sincere He greatly delighted,  
At the simple He greatly rejoiced.  
Blessed is His teaching!

<sup>7</sup> Brock, S.P., "Baptismal Themes in the Writings of St. Jacob of Serugh", *OCA* 199 (1978), pp. 325-347.





St. Ephrem

COURTESY HOLY TRANSFIGURATION MONASTERY

He did not hold back His footsteps from the sick,  
 or His words from the simple;  
 He extended His descent to the lowly,  
 And His ascension to the highest.  
 Blessed is His sender!

There is another wonderful hymn, very rich in imagery, composed by Mar Isaac (presumably Isaac of Antioch):

In it, in Nisan<sup>8</sup>, the earth bore Adam from nothing,  
 And by that type, on a day of Nisan, baptism has borne us.  
 For the time of Nisan is like a time of revival,  
 In which the plants are revived like the dead from the tombs.  
 In it the earth bore Adam; in it the tomb bore our Lord  
 In it the church bears its children; in it the dust bears everyone.  
 In it was Adam's beginning; in it was Christ's beginning.  
 In Nisan Gabriel announced Him, and in Nisan He died and was revived.  
 In Nisan was Adam's birthday; in Nisan was Adam's revival.  
 In it the beginning was formed; in it the end will be appointed.

RTE: What other early Church writers commented on the descent into Hades?

IRINA: One such writer is Tatian, the 2nd century Syrian Christian apologist, who is best known as having been a pupil of Justin Martyr<sup>9</sup> and for compiling the first gospel *harmony* (an early Christian practice of “harmonizing” the four gospels into one book) called the *Diatessaron*. It seems plausible that Tatian already knew of the interpretation of Psalm 106/7 in the context of the descent of Christ. In the Greek tradition, the earliest direct and clear interpretation of I Peter 3:19 arises in connection with Christ's descent into Hades in a quote by Clement of Alexandria in his *Stromata* (VI. 6. 37-39) as well as in his *Adumbrationes*. We also find a reference to I Peter 3:19 in the Easter Homily written by St. Hippolytus of Rome. The *Shepherd of Hermas* (dated to 150 A.D.) mentions the descent of Christ and the baptism of the dead in *Sim. IX 16:5*. Another famous reference can be found in the homily *On Pascha* by Bishop Melito of Sardis. The usual context for references to the descent into Hades are commentaries and sermons during the Easter vigil and on the sacrament of baptism. In ancient times, of course, people were baptized after 8 April.

<sup>9</sup> *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. Freedman, D.N., vol. VI, New York: 1996, p. 335.

Great Lent, during the Easter vigil, after which they had their first Communion; it must have been a very revealing experience for them.

Simply naming the fathers who mention the descent of Christ into Hades in their homilies makes quite a long list. There are: St. Cyril of Alexandria, who writes that Christ accepted death according to the divine plan of salvation in order to destroy the dominion of death; St. John Chrysostom, in his *Catechetical Homily on Holy Easter* which we read in church every Pascha; St. Gregory of Nyssa in *On Holy Pascha* and *On Three Days Among the Dead*; St. Cyril of Jerusalem in the *Catecheses to the Illumined*; St. Basil the Great; St. John of Damascus; and St. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain. Among the Syriac Fathers we can list St. Ephrem the Syrian, Narsai, Jacob of Serugh, St. Isaac the Syrian, and many others. Also, there are very ancient documents such as the *Odes of Solomon* and the *Acts of Thomas* that speak of the descent of Christ into Hades, as well as Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History*.

This is only the beginning of the list I could have made, and you can conclude from this how important this subject was for early Christians and how closely connected it was with the mystery of Christ's Resurrection and our salvation history.

## Contemporary Christianity and the Descent into Hell

RTE: How do contemporary western Christians view the descent into hell, and how does this differ from those who adhere closer to the eastern Syriac traditions?

IRINA: From what I have seen, contemporary views on the descent into hell among Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants are largely confused. Some people do not even connect the descent into hell with the work of salvation done by Christ. It somehow exists as a separate appendage in their mind and from time to time takes the form of an unanswered question.

One can say that in the first three centuries the interpretations of the descent were very similar in both East and West. The Eastern Orthodox still hold to that earlier view. However, in the fourth and fifth centuries, the West began leaning towards a more legalistic understanding of this teaching, and

the circle of those saved by Christ through His descent into hell became narrower and narrower. First, one excludes those sinners who are doomed to eternal suffering, then those who are in purgatory, then unchristened babies. Eventually, the descent became understood as the liberation of humanity from the effect of the general original sin, but not so-called "personal sins."

In Catholicism, the teaching on the descent is more of an answer about the state and condition of the faithful departed. Mostly, the descent serves as an answer to the question of what happened to those righteous and godly people who lived before Christ, and indicates that Christ saved them. In Catholic teaching it also opens the way to the idea of purgatory.

It is difficult to say what this teaching means for Protestants, some of whom do not acknowledge the descent at all. Theological objections are sometimes based on the grounds that for Christ to have descended into hell, He would have to have borne God's "curse." John Calvin observed that those who hold this objection "have never earnestly considered what it is or means that we have been redeemed from God's judgment. Yet this is our wisdom: duly to feel how much our salvation cost the Son of God." Calvin's conclusion, therefore, is that Christ's descent into Hell was necessary for atonement, because Christ did in fact endure the penalty for the sins of the redeemed. According to this view, Christ has led out of hell only those who were initially predestined for salvation. However, this view is unacceptable and distorted. God did not want to show us how much our salvation cost the Son of God. The whole act of salvation rather shows how much we as His creation cost and mean to Him – that He sent His only-begotten Son to experience death.

I cannot say what the psychology or attitude of a Syriac Christian might be, and I do not wish to speculate. However, one could suggest that because this teaching on the descent of Christ still holds a prominent place in the spiritual life of the Syriac Churches, it surely inspires hope and paschal joy in the hearts of the people, as it does among many Orthodox, eastern and western. The wall that separated God and humanity has fallen, and the boundless mercy of God has been revealed to us; death and sin were deprived of their power, which proved to be illusory. Although they seem to continue to reign in the world we know that God alone is the ruler of the universe. I would presume that the tone of a Syriac Christian's faith may be more life-asserting and spontaneous in expressing their love for God. There is more hope and trust in such an outlook; it is pervaded by a feeling of particular closeness and gratitude to God.

The Syriac tradition speaks of Christ taking the Old Testament righteous with Adam. The tragedy of the Old Testament was that it had lost the idea of God as a loving father. Even the righteous were subject to this spiritual death: they were deprived of the joy of spontaneous communication with God. Old Adam is the symbol of this old mankind; Christ is the one who became “the second Adam,” or according to the expression of St. Ephrem, the firstborn of Sheol<sup>10</sup>, after His descent and resurrection. Now He is the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last man who overcame endless death and revealed God as a loving father to the whole of humanity. Thus, the descent into Sheol continues to be perceived as an event which had tremendous meaning for the whole cosmos and all of creation<sup>11</sup>.

For me, this is summed up by lines from the *Book of Wisdom 1:12-16*:

Do not court death by the errors of your ways,  
Nor invite destruction through the work of your hands.  
For God did not make Death,  
He takes no pleasure in destroying the living.  
To exist – for this He created all things;  
The creatures of the world have health in them,  
In them is no fatal poison,  
And Hades has no power over the world:  
For uprightness is immortal.

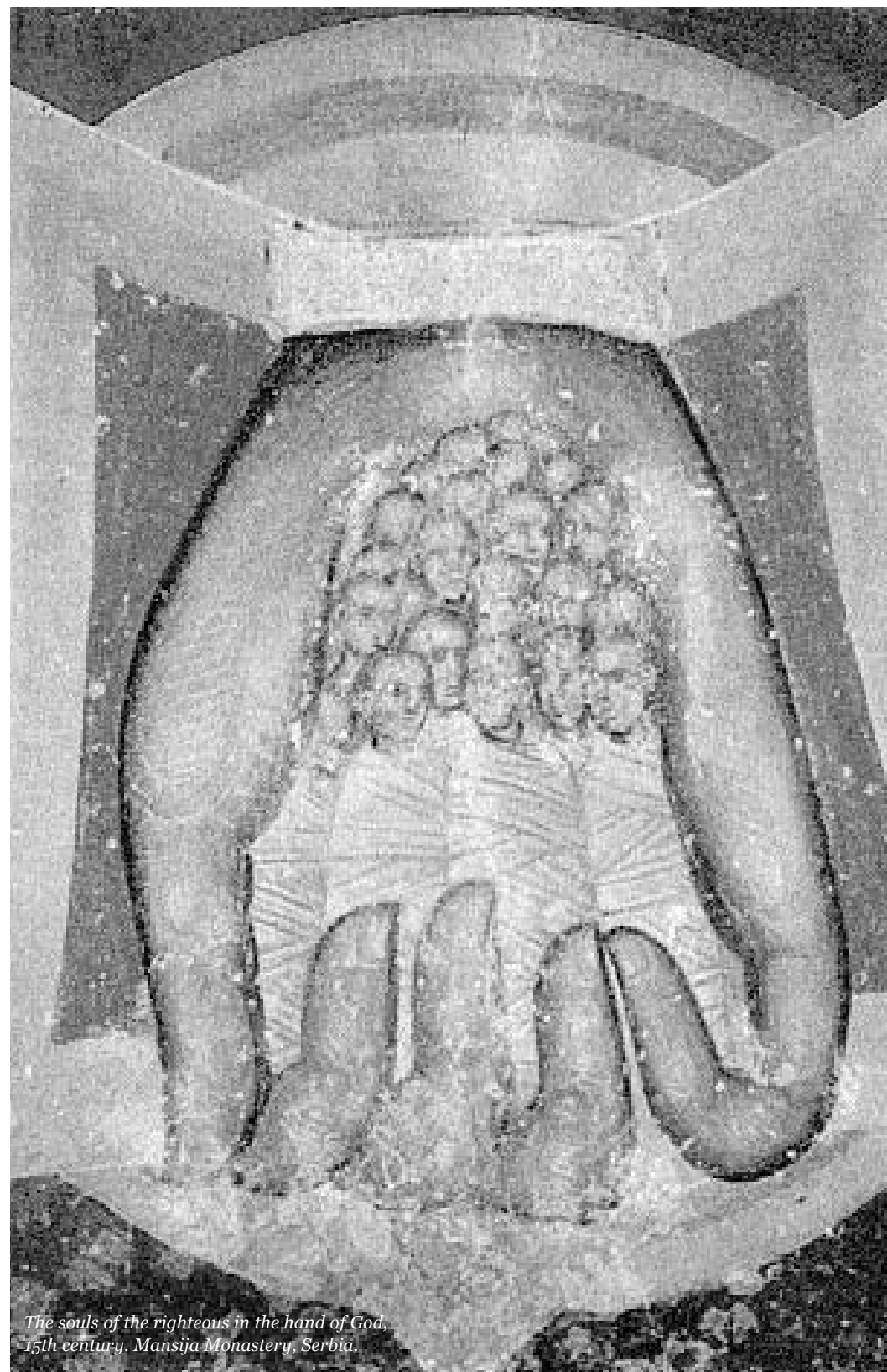
## The Traditions of Hades, Sheol, Gehenna, and Hell

RTE: Irina, can you explain to us the difference between Hades, Sheol, and Hell?

IRINA: This is a very serious question, and I am afraid my answer will be quite long. First, let us deal with the terms for the underworld and how they developed historically. The Greek name for the underworld, where it was believed that everyone went after death, was Hades. In ancient Greek mythology Hades (or “gloomy Hades,” as they usually called it) was the name of the underworld ruler who ruled the land of the dead. This land was full of

<sup>10</sup> See 1 Cor. 15: 20,23, 45, 47

<sup>11</sup> Alfeyev, Hilarion, *Khristos-Pobeditel' Ada*, St.-Petersburg: 2001, p. 307



*The souls of the righteous in the hand of God,  
15th century, Mansija Monastery, Serbia.*



St. Issac the Syrian

terrors and monsters. *The Odyssey* mentions two kinds of dead. First, the human souls (of every sort) who wander without punishment but are wearied by their memories of life. Their existence is shadow-like, they lament the fact that they have had to leave their dear ones, or if they died young, that they did not live long enough to enjoy their lives; their spirits are appeased if sacrifices and libations are offered for them on their graves. Some authors (among them Pseudo-Clement) mention that the land of the dead is in the west or on the western side of the Ocean (“Ocean” was a mythic notion, as well). Also in Hades were the superhuman rebels (the so-called “Titans”) sentenced to undying exertions for insubordination to Zeus and transgression of the divine order. Actually, in Greek mythology the Titans were beneath Hades in Tartarus, a fearful dungeon. Only later does the idea of the Elysian Fields (or Elysium) appear. This is the land of the virtuous dead and of heroes, who enjoy abundance and beauty after their earthly death.

In the patristic times these pagan ideas about Hades were abandoned, or rather, transformed. However, the name of the place often remained in Greek writings: Hades was the place where everyone went after their death, awaiting the Last Judgement, although the Christian view of this state differed greatly from that of the ancient Greeks. The concept of Hades as the place where souls go after death appears in the Septuagint as the Hebrew “Sheol.”

Sheol appears in the Hebrew-language Bible as a proper name, without an article, and it is apparently feminine<sup>12</sup> in Is. 5:14; 14:9; Ps. 86:13; and Job 26:6. The whole earth is seen as Sheol’s belly (Ex. 15:12). Sheol has many disguises. It was often called a pit, which was usually imagined as a vast subterranean cave with a narrow mouth like a well. It was also called a prison, a fortified city, and we hear of the “miry waters of Sheol.”

In Hebrew usage (and later also in Syriac), Sheol and Death refer to the condition of diminished life. Sheol means danger, illness, death. Life means fertility, light and order. Just the fact of being alive had moral qualities for an ancient Jew, and the idea of the living God and the abode of the dead essentially exclude each other in Hebrew thought. Just as the fullness of life implies the presence of Yahweh, so the sojourn in Sheol connotes His absence. Sheol is Sheol because the living God is not there.

Death and God’s grace excluded each other in this outlook. In dying, a man lost his full relationship to God, which explains the complaint that the dead cannot praise Yahweh. Even the righteous went to Sheol after their

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament*, Rome: 1969.



death, “to the land of gloom and deep darkness, the land of gloom and chaos, where light is as darkness” (Job 10:21-22). In Hebrew thought, all of the dead sojourned in Sheol without any difference of rank, position, or moral life. Death was the great leveler.

Sheol was a negative counterpart of the earth; being chaotic, it was approached via negations. It was furnished with negative experiences (as opposed to the favourable ones on earth) that corresponded to the griefs of this life. In fact, misery on earth anticipated the stay in the kingdom of death. A reduced shadow-like existence faced the individual in Sheol; he still lived, but did not possess the fullness of earthly life.<sup>13</sup> According to Ecclesiastes 9:10, in Sheol “there is no work, no device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom...”

Besides Sheol, death itself was experienced not as an abstract power or an explicable fate, but as a personal reality, the *Archenemy*, the *King*, the *Shepherd*, or as a threatening demon whose abode is Sheol. This explains why death is alluded to rather than discussed. The devil, the personification of moral evil, is also associated with death and Sheol. The use of the same symbols and metaphors for the three of them (e.g. the devouring lion) suggests a close connection between them.

This was the oldest notion of Sheol, but it is clear that this conception created a number of theological problems: an apparent restriction of Yahweh’s omnipotence, as well as raising questions concerning the necessity of virtue in earthly life.

Later, the *Book of Watchers* in *I Enoch* distinguishes between Sheol and Gehenna. Gehenna was a name for the place of punishment of the damned and comes from the Hebrew *gê-hinnom* (Neh. 11:30), or the longer form *gê-ben-hinnom* (Jos. 15:8) and *gê-benê-hinnom* (IV Kings 23:10) “valley of the sons of Hinnom.” Hinnom seems to be the name of a person not otherwise known. The Valley of Hinnom is south of Jerusalem and is now called Wadi er-rababi. In earlier days it was notorious as the scene of the horrible worship of Moloch. For this reason it was defiled by Josiah (IV Kings 23:10), cursed by Jeremiah (Jer. 7:31-33), and held in abomination by the Jews, who, accordingly, used the name of this valley to designate the abode of the damned (*Targ Jon*, Gen. 3:24; Enoch 36).

*I Enoch* is one of the earliest documents speaking of such divisions among the dead (Ch. 18-21). It was under the influence of apocalyptic trends that the traditional view of Sheol and the afterlife began to change. In these texts

<sup>13</sup> Robert Ombres, *Theology of Purgatory*, Dublin: 1978, p. 17.

we read about men who are not shades, but conscious beings with their characters, individuality and moral qualities.<sup>14</sup> Some texts, such as Enoch, also mention the division between the righteous and the evildoers in Sheol after their death, e.g. *2 Baruch* 54.15<sup>15</sup>:

For though Adam first sinned and brought untimely death upon all, yet of those who were born from Him each one of them has prepared for his own soul torment to come, and again each one of them has chosen for himself glories to come.

These multiple notions of Sheol from the Hebrew were inherited early on by Christians in Syria. Early Syriac Fathers use much the same imagery. St. Ephrem speaks of Sheol as a place where Death, Satan, and sin dwell, as well as their myrmidons – various sorts of demons. Death (as well as Sheol) is an aggressive, dangerous attacking power which destroys life. As Christ both died and was killed, so He perceived the horror and aggression of death, the weight of sin working on an innocent man; He partook of the whole tragedy of death. The bounds of human nature were accepted and transformed from within by Him. So, the teaching on the descent is primarily an emphasis on life, on Christ conquering Sheol and death and releasing their prisoners (i.e. the dead). The earliest authors say that all of the prisoners of Sheol were released and taken by Christ to Paradise. St. Ephrem mentions that after the descent, Sheol was totally emptied: only Satan, sin and evil demons were left there.

Both Hades and Sheol are usually rendered as “hell” in the western tradition, and the word itself is of pagan origin. The term *hell* is cognate to “hole” (cavern) and “hollow.” It is a substantive formed from the Anglo-Saxon *helan* or *behelian*, “to hide.” Thus, it denotes a dark and hidden place. In Scandinavian mythology, Hell was also a goddess of the underworld. In later Christian Europe, “hell” came to mean both Sheol and Gehenna, or if we use the Greek, both Hades and Tartarus. Although in the West we now commonly use hell to mean any place or state of suffering in the afterlife, and we even speak of Christ’s descent into hell, it is important to remember that heaven and hell, in their fullness, will not begin until after the Last Judgement.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Ombres, *Theology of Purgatory*, Dublin: 1978, p. 17

<sup>15</sup> Charles, R.H., ed. *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, vol. II, p. 274.

## The Christian Afterlife

According to the Church fathers, the afterlife we experience after death but before the Last Judgement differs from the ancient Greek idea of Hades, where the soul has no volition, no fullness of life. This is not the Christian notion of the afterlife! The life of the soul after death is in one sense a continuation of its life on earth, with its acquired passions and virtues. If death radically changed the nature of the soul, this would violate the soul's freedom. However, according to the fathers, after death the powers of the soul are restricted. It can no longer repair its evil deeds on earth (alas!), or initiate a good action by its own will, but it can pray, asking Christ for forgiveness and help for itself and others.

Orthodox Church tradition most commonly teaches that after the soul leaves the body, the souls of both the righteous and the sinners are in a state of waiting for the Last Judgement when they will be reunited with their transfigured bodies. There are exceptions, such as the Theotokos, the Mother of God, who was borne body and soul by the angels directly into heaven. As for most of us, they say, we remain in this condition of waiting until the Last Judgement. Those who have lived their present life with virtue and were pleasing to God, are anchored after death in the "bosom of Abraham," that is, in a spiritual place of blessedness. The impious will be in a worse place. St. Athanasius teaches that after death the righteous experience a "partial enjoyment," while the sinners experience a "partial judgement."

RTE: And when and how did the teaching on the toll houses arise?

IRINA: If we are to discuss the toll houses, we first have to clarify that this tradition is not a dogma of the Orthodox Church, nor an official teaching, but a recurring idea in Orthodox tradition. St. Cyril of Alexandria gives one of our earliest references to ordeals at the toll houses, through which the soul passes ascending to the throne of God, but this tradition began to flourish only after the popularization of the *Ordeals of the Blessed Theodora*. This was not a text in its own right, but a famous passage from the tenth-century *Life of Basil the Younger* (a Byzantine saint of Constantinople who reposed in 944) on the vision granted to Basil's disciple, Gregory, about the fate of Basil's former maid, Theodora, after her death. She revealed her fate to him in a dream and he wrote her story down. The idea developed that the soul after its death abandons the body and passes through toll-houses where it is questioned by



*The Good Shephard, 1773, St. John the Theologian Monastery, Patmos.*

demons about its life and deeds on earth. The idea of the toll houses may be derived from an ancient tradition that people are questioned about their deeds on earth by demons; and the guardian angels or saints, or both, help them to answer these questions, remembering each kind deed the person had done in earthly life, but had since forgotten or did not even suspect. To put it roughly, we have two antagonist parties struggling for the soul. That is why souls leave these toll houses rather exhausted. If the kind deeds and virtues of the soul are more than its sins, that is, if the affinity of the soul inclines more to light than to darkness, the soul will enter Paradise.

I do not know if such a teaching was known in ancient Syria. The ideas found in the *Life of Basil the Younger* were popularized by Bishop Ignaty Brianchaninov in early 19th-century Russia.

RTE: Irina, a moment ago you spoke of the “partial judgement” of St. Athanasius. How does this differ from the “particular judgement” of the Roman Catholic Church, and their teaching on purgatory?

IRINA: This Orthodox reference to the partial judgement is based on Heb. 9:27 “since human beings die only once, after which comes judgement.” However, the Apostle Paul did not say that this judgement would immediately follow death. So, in this case there may be two possible interpretations here: either the apostle meant the Last Judgement, or when a person’s life and actions are their own judgement, as expressed in John 3:18: “no one who believes in Him will be judged; but whoever does not believe is judged already.”

In Roman Catholic theology, those souls destined for heaven (with a few exceptions) must endure a state of purgation, or purification. In classical Catholic thought this was explained as an expiation or atonement for unrepented sins committed during one’s earthly life. This is a kind of time-limited hell during which the soul becomes fully cleansed and acceptable for admission to heaven. Thus, in Catholic thought, purgatory is *not* a middle state between heaven and hell; one goes there to be fitted for life in heaven. Souls are *sanctified* in purgatory, and, indeed, purgatory is viewed as the final stage of sanctification. “All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still *imperfectly purified*, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, pg. 1030). So, in Catholic teaching, purgatory is the place where already saved souls are cleansed of the temporal effects of sin before they are allowed to see the holy



St. John Chrysostom

face of Almighty God. This idea is based on the text of *Revelation 21:27*, which says, "...nothing unclean will enter [heaven]." Because some have a prevision of the glory to come and others foretaste their suffering, the state of waiting for the Final Judgement and reunion with the transfigured body is called the "Particular Judgement," which, as you mentioned, is not accepted in Orthodox teaching, where a human being is seen as a psychosomatic unity, which means that soul cannot be judged without its instrument, the body.

Prominent Orthodox theologian Bishop Kallistos of Dioklea acknowledges that there exist various theological views on the life of the soul after death, but he adds, "Today most if not all Orthodox theologians reject the idea of purgatory, at least in its [Catholic] form."<sup>16</sup> That is, they reject the teaching that the soul must render "satisfaction" or "atonement."

The Roman Catholic teaching remained consistent with what I have just described until, in a talk on purgatory to Catholic pilgrims to Rome in July of 1999, Pope John Paul II came very close to the Orthodox position. The ideas of Catholic Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger are also consistent with this new direction in Catholic thinking. In his book on eschatology, Ratzinger describes purgatory as a fiery, transforming encounter with Christ and His love:

"Purgatory is not, as Tertullian thought, some kind of supra-worldly concentration camp where one is forced to undergo punishments in a more or less arbitrary fashion. Rather it is the inwardly necessary process of transformation in which a person becomes capable of Christ, capable of God [i.e., capable of full unity with Christ and God] and thus capable of unity with the whole communion of saints. Simply to look at people with any degree of realism at all is to grasp the necessity of such a process. It does not replace grace by works, but allows the former to achieve its full victory precisely as grace. What actually saves is the full assent of faith. But in most of us, that basic option is buried under a great deal of wood, hay, and straw. Only with difficulty can it peer out from behind the latticework of an egoism we are powerless to pull down with our own hands. Man is the recipient of the divine mercy, yet this does not exonerate him from the need to be transformed. Encounter with the Lord is this transformation. It is the fire that burns away our dross and re-forms us to be vessels of eternal joy."

<sup>16</sup> Ware, T., *The Orthodox Church: New Edition*, New York: 1997, p. 255.

I find it quite inspiring that such currents of thought exist in the modern Catholic Church. However, in my view, one fine point still remains: in Orthodoxy it is not God who asks recompense or expiation and sends a soul for either temporal cleansing or eternal punishment. St. Isaac the Syrian says, "God is not One who requites evil, but He sets evil aright." Christ is our only atonement and satisfaction. Thus, sufferings of the soul beyond the grave are the result of its own doing, its own choice (which, as it seems to me, the tradition of the toll houses strives to express). It is a soul's "toll" to the world, to mortality, to the moral feebleness and evil to which the soul was subjected in earthly life. This seems logical to me and is perhaps consistent with the sense of the popular phrase: "like attracts like." But we can and should pray for the reposed, in hope of a change of their state for the better.

RTE: You've spoken of Orthodox and Catholic teaching on the afterlife, but many western countries are more heavily influenced by Protestant thinking, particularly by the fearful Calvinist-shaded views that seem to drift through the background of popular western Christian thought.

IRINA: Yes, I feel that, too. First of all, it shows up in exceedingly judgmental attitudes towards other people. I'm thinking particularly of discussions I've heard among some Orthodox about whether certain people (still living!) will be saved, which is futile and strongly reeks of Calvinism. Unfortunately, it is forgotten that "*for every unfounded word people utter they will answer on Judgement Day*" (Mt. 12:36) and "*the judgements you give are the judgements you will get*" (Mt. 7:2). Christ is very careful with a human soul, He is "*gentle and humble in heart*" (Mt. 11:29). "*He will not break the crushed reed, or snuff the faltering wick*" (Mt. 12:20). "*And you will find rest for your souls,*" He promises to those who bring their burdens to Him (Mt. 11:28). The person who loves us knows us inwardly. So does God. God does not spy on us counting our sins; for Him it is just enough to cast a look at us. He calls us to come to Him and bring our burdens to Him. Christ heals our wounds and sins.

The division of souls into the categories of "redeemed" and "damned" before the Final Judgement has drastic consequences for Christians. This is not according to the Gospel (Mt. 18:12-14; Mt. 13:24-30), and in holding such opinions Christianity ceases to be the religion of love and openness towards God and our fellow humans. It stops being a religion of "only one Master and ...all brothers" (Mt. 23:8). Instead of love towards one's neighbour it degenerates

ates into counting his sins, whether real or imaginary. Christ died for that person, we didn't. He is God's creation; God alone knows each heart and He alone can decide a soul's fate. We can only pray for one another.

## Praying for the Dead

RTE: Since you've brought this up, both Orthodox and Roman Catholics believe that prayers for the departed have an effect before the Final Judgement. Would you comment briefly on what the Church fathers say about this?

IRINA: Church tradition says that the soul of the departed cannot change of its own accord in the other world and acquire what it had never had in earthly life. The soul continues to live in the same state after death as it did on earth. Those who believed in God and tried to fulfill His commandments feel His presence and rejoice. Those who, because of their sins did not perceive God as a loving Father do not feel this joy. For this reason the soul needs help from outside itself. This help it receives through the Saviour who descended into hell, and through the Church, for He is the Head of the Church. It is naïve to think that we pray to God to mollify Him and make Him more merciful towards our beloved departed. God is boundless love and does not need our requests in order to love His creation. Our prayers do not make God more merciful, but rather, seem to help change for the better the souls about whom we pray. St. Mark of Ephesus says that the souls of the dead are purified through the power of prayers on their behalf. If we pray for them, it seems that their inner disposition can somehow change, so that they can begin to pray with us.<sup>17</sup>

The early Christian Church was fully aware of the importance of prayers for the dead. That is what we find in the writings of such fathers as St. Cyril of Jerusalem and St. John Chrysostom:

Then we make mention also of those who have already fallen asleep: first, the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs, that through their prayers and supplications God would receive our petition; next, we make mention also of the holy fathers and bishops who have already

<sup>17</sup> See the article by Bishop Anthony of Geneva and Western Europe "What Can We Know About the Afterlife Existence of a Human Soul?" To read the article in Russian check [http://www.st-nikolas.orthodoxy.ru/news/soul\\_after\\_death.html](http://www.st-nikolas.orthodoxy.ru/news/soul_after_death.html)



*Ladder of Divine Ascent, Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai.*



St. John Damascene

fallen asleep, and, to put it simply, of all among us who have already fallen asleep, for we believe that it will be of very great benefit to the souls of those for whom the petition is carried up, while this holy and most solemn sacrifice is laid out” (St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 23:5:9, written in 350 AD).

“Let us help and commemorate them. If Job’s sons were purified by their father’s sacrifice<sup>18</sup>, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them” (St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians* 41:5, written in 392 AD).

Early Acts of the martyrs tell us the same. *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*<sup>19</sup> (from 203 AD) is a fine example of this, for it contains a famous passage about Dinocrates, the brother of Perpetua. She first tells us of the vision of her brother straight after his death and then of another vision of her brother after she had been praying for him:

Some days later, when we were all at prayer, suddenly while praying I spoke out and uttered the name Dinocrates. I was surprised; for the name had never entered my mind until that moment. And I was pained when I recalled what had happened to him. At once I realized that I was privileged to pray for him. I began to pray for him and to sigh deeply before the Lord. That very night I had the following vision. I saw Dinocrates coming out of a dark hole, where there were many others with him, very hot and thirsty, pale and dirty. On his face was the wound he had when he died.

Now Dinocrates had been my brother according to the flesh; but he had died horribly of cancer of the face when he was seven years old, and his death was a source of loathing to everyone. Thus it was for him that I had made my prayer. There was a great abyss between us: neither could approach the other. Where Dinocrates stood there was a pool full of water; and its rim was higher than the child’s height, so that Dinocrates had to stretch himself up to drink. I was sorry that, though the pool had water in it, Dinocrates could not drink because of the height of the rim. Then I woke up realizing that my brother was suffering. But I was confident that I could help him in his trouble; and I prayed for him every day ....

<sup>18</sup> Job 1:5

<sup>19</sup> Original text and translation are published by Musurillo, H., *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, vol. II, Oxford: 2000, p. 115-117.

On the day we were kept in chains, I had this vision shown to me. I saw the same spot that I had seen before, but there was Dinocrates all clean, well dressed and refreshed, I saw a scar where the wound had been; and the pool that I had seen before now had its rim lowered to the level of the child's waist. And Dinocrates kept drinking water from it, and yet the bowl remained full. And when he had drunk enough of the water, he began to play as children do. Then I awoke, and I realized that he had been delivered from his suffering.

The Church teaches us that prayers for the dead in church services are even more powerful than private prayers. They nourish and enrich the soul, helping it to replenish what it lacks: love towards our Saviour, faith in His compassion, repentance, awareness of its sinfulness. Such feelings and states which the soul acquires through the prayers of the Church, help it to come closer to God and affect the fate of the soul beyond the grave.

The Church includes both the living and the faithful dead, praying to God in a spiritual communion of praise, solidarity and help. The prayers in the Orthodox funeral service show clearly that the Church is seen as a unity: "Give rest, our Saviour, to our brother, whom You have taken over from transient things as he cries, Glory to Thee." In the Slavonic version of the *Canon After the Departure of the Soul*, we hear the refrain, "Lord, grant peace to your departed slave who is praying to you through us."<sup>20</sup> Certainly the saints, and even the souls of the departed faithful, can pray fervently to the living God.

RTE: Many contemporary western Christians seem to feel themselves caught in a dichotomy between an all-merciful, loving God, and the idea of the same God who allows people to suffer eternally. This confusion keeps some from fully trusting God, and others reject the idea of hell entirely, as "not being worthy of a loving God."

IRINA: Yes. However, there is another important facet in understanding hell, and that is that hell is not a place. Neither can we understand fully where those who died before Christ were, for human souls are not physical.<sup>21</sup>

Hell means torment and torture. Catholic teaching says that the punishment will be in the form of isolation from God, and some supernatural form of fire which causes endless, unbearable pain but does not consume the body,

<sup>20</sup> "Upokoi Gospodi dushu usopshego raba tvoego, nami tebe molyaschegosya."

<sup>21</sup> Sister Magdalen, *Conversations with Children*, Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, Essex: 2001, p. 223.

while the Eastern Orthodox Church teaches that the precise form of punishment is not known to us. The Church fathers teach that this torment is:

- 1) self-inflicted, a result of preferring darkness to light during this life; and,
- 2) that God's presence and light are a torment for those who abused their human freedom.

In his *Mystic Treatises* St. Isaac the Syrian writes:

...those who find themselves in Hell will be chastised by the scourge of love. How cruel and bitter this torment of love will be! For those who understand that they have sinned against love, undergo no greater suffering than that produced by the most fearful tortures. The sorrow that takes hold of the heart which has sinned against love, is more piercing than any other pain. It is not right to say that the sinners in Hell are deprived of the love of God ... But love acts in two ways, as suffering of the reprovéd, and as joy in the blessed!

As I said earlier, it is very interesting to find the Catholics moving toward a comparatively similar view. In an address to English-speaking Catholic pilgrims in Rome on July 28, 1999, Pope John Paul II said: "Hell is not a punishment imposed externally by God, but the condition resulting from attitudes and actions which people adopt in this life. It is the ultimate consequence of sin itself. Sacred Scripture uses many images to describe the pain, frustration and emptiness of life without God. More than a physical place, hell is the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy. So eternal damnation is not God's work but is actually our own doing."

RTE: In facing this possibility of our sins causing an eternal separation from God, what significance does the Lord's descent into Hades have on our everyday struggles with our passions and shortcomings?

IRINA: It seems to me that the teaching on the descent demonstrates to us that a human being is not left alone in this world to cope with its troubles and with his own inner turmoils. Once God hears our cry *de profundis* [out of the depths]; He descends to save us.

I think it is very unfortunate that nowadays we tend to separate the process of salvation from that of the Last Judgement of the Lord. In earlier

times there was no such dichotomy. Among the 11-12th century mosaics in the Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta in Torcello, Venice, is a very prominent scene of the descent into hell in the upper tier of mosaics, and scenes from the Last Judgement in the lower tiers. Here we are reminded that Christ, first of all, is our Saviour, and then our Judge. In his 1930's *Poem About Death*, Russian philosopher and medievalist Lev Karsavin, who died twenty years later in a hard labour camp in Abez, northern Russia, writes: "It is the *world* who cannot bear the vision of God's Fullness and falls apart at the approach of Divinity. God does not put anyone to death; He is God of the living, not of the dead, for He is Love."<sup>22</sup>

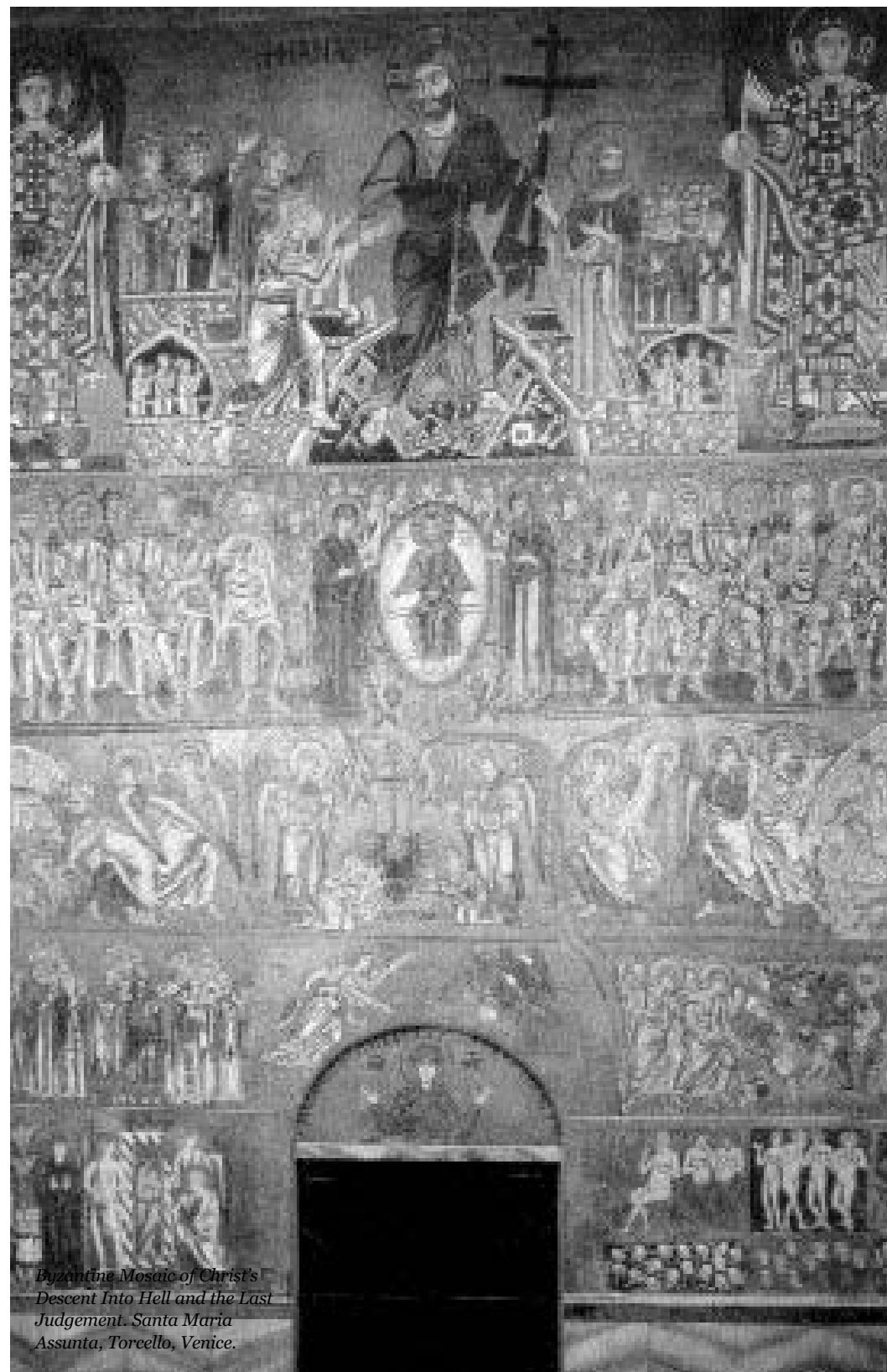
It seems to me that hell is a vicious circle from which God liberates us: an endless cycle of wrongdoing and guilt, abuse and revenge, exploitation and revolt, victimization and alienation, addiction and rejection – all are servants of hell, sin, and death, which only bog us deeper in the miry depths of Sheol – and this is what God saves us from. One can see parallels to what sin and hell are like in the sufferings of deeply depressed or mentally ill people. Once a certain thought or perception begins to trouble them (one can also speak here about the patristic notion of *logismoi*),<sup>23</sup> they begin dwelling on it until the thought or perception grows out of proportion, like an avalanche of snow, eventually demanding the whole person and engrossing him in itself. In this sense, hell is indeed eternal, for it possesses the nature of vicious repetition, where there is no hope for liberation and breaking the cycle. It has many disguises but the result is common to them all: a feeling of hopelessness. This is why one needs external help. This is why, feeling hopeless, we pray to Christ. In the gospels, Christ never rejects people crying to Him for help, nor does He tell them: "Wait here for a while, suffer a while and you will become holy because of it," but cures those addressing Him immediately. Only those who deny and reject Christ will be driven into outer darkness.

RTE: But, we might ask, if God is so merciful, how is it that hell exists at all?

IRINA: Archimandrite Sophrony, the disciple of St. Silouan of Mount Athos, once recounted a dialogue that took place between Staretz Silouan and a hermit who declared that all atheists will burn in everlasting fire. The staretz asked the hermit, if he went to Paradise, and looking down, saw someone burning in hell-fire, would he still feel happy? To which the

<sup>22</sup> Karsavin, L, *Religiozno-Filosofskie Sochineniya, Poema o Smerti*, vol. I, Moskva, 1992, p. 268.

<sup>23</sup> Markides, Kyriacos C., *The Mountain of Silence*, New York: 2001, p 124-127.



Byzantine Mosaic of Christ's  
Descent Into Hell and the Last  
Judgement. Santa Maria  
Assunta, Torcello, Venice.





St. Athanasius the Great

hermit replied, “It can’t be helped. It would be their own fault.” Staretz Silouan answered him with a sorrowful countenance. “Love could not bear that,” he said. “We must pray for all.”<sup>24</sup>

How is it then possible that hell exists at all? If God is so compassionate and full of love why is there so much suffering? There is a direct connection between the existence of hell and what happened in the Garden of Eden. As Bishop Kallistos writes, quoting St. Isaac the Syrian, “Hell is not God’s rejection of humankind but humankind’s refusal of God. It is not a punishment which God inflicts upon us, but a state of mind in which we punish ourselves. God does not shut the door against those in hell; He does not withdraw His love from them, but it is they who deliberately harden their hearts against that love.”<sup>25</sup>

The world cannot easily be divided into parties of good and bad people. We all share in the fall of Adam and in the state associated with hell, to a greater or lesser extent. This is our judgement in our present earthly life. We do harden our hearts against God’s love. We are all sinners with our passions and faults, which means that in one way or another we are also responsible for the existence of hell. When St. Silouan thought about his own sins against God and began condemning himself, he almost fell into despondency, but while praying he heard, “Keep your mind in hell and despair not.” It seems that these words were meant not only for him but for all of us. We know that St. Silouan prayed with tears “for those in hell” until the end of his life.

In his *Nisibene Hymn 36:1*, St. Ephrem writes that Christ, through His saving work, has undone the consequences of the fall of Adam and removed the curse from humanity:

Our Lord has subdued His (own) power and they took hold of Him,  
 So that His living death could bring Adam to life,  
 He gave over His hands to be fixed by nails  
 Instead of the hand which had plucked the fruit<sup>26</sup>.  
 He was struck on the cheek in the house of Judgement  
 In place of the mouth which ate in Eden<sup>27</sup>.  
 Because Adam’s feet were set loose

<sup>24</sup> Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: 1991, p. 48.

<sup>25</sup> Bishop Kallistos Ware, “Dare We Hope for the Salvation of All?” in *The Inner Kingdom*, Crestwood, NY: 2000, p. 211.

<sup>26</sup> The reverse of what happened in Paradise. See *Gen 3:6*.

<sup>27</sup> *Gen 3:6*.

They nailed His feet. Our Lord was stripped of His garments  
so as to make chaste.<sup>28</sup>

Through bitter herbs and gall

He sweetened the poison of the snake, which had been poured  
out onto humanity.<sup>29</sup>

On the one hand, we are already saved, as the Church fathers teach; on the other, we face the prospect of being judged for our sins. The Apostle Paul proclaims both the universality of sin and universality of redemption. In 1 Corinthians 15:22 he draws a parallel between the first Adam and Christ, the second Adam: “*As all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.*” Also in Romans 5:18 and 11:32 he says, “*Just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.*” “*God has imprisoned all in disobedience, that He may be merciful to all.*” Finally, his well-known passage in 1 Corinthians 15:28 seems to speak of a future reconciliation between God and all His creation: “*And when all things are made subject to the Son, then the Son himself will also be made subject to the Father, who has subjected all things to Him; and thus God will be all in all*” ... “*This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*” (1 Timothy 2:4).

So, if God does not wish to destroy us, if He wishes our salvation, does that mean that there will be no hell? If He descended into hell, does this mean that He destroyed it completely? Does this mean that hell cannot be eternal? It is a paradox, to which we can only give two answers: yes and no. It seems to me that Karsavin has brilliantly expressed the idea of the mystery of Christ’s descent: “*So there is no eternal existence of hell ... for the whole of creation is saved, and there is eternal existence of hell for all have sinned, all and everyone. There is the existence of hell, for Christ is with His soul in hell as God, and God Himself is in hell (‘If I go down to hell, you are there also.’),<sup>30</sup> and there is no existence of hell for Christ has triumphed over, shattered, destroyed, put to death through the effulgence of His divinity, endless hell. This aporia is evident to everyone who reads the New Testament. All are saved despite the fact that all are in hell. An eternity of*

<sup>28</sup> Gen. 3:7.

<sup>29</sup> See Gen. 3: 4-5. In other works such as *Commentary on Genesis* and *On the Nativity of Our Lord*, St. Ephrem writes about the serpent pouring poison into Eve’s ears.

<sup>30</sup> Ps 138/9:8.

the torments of hell does not contradict an eternity of Godliness, the uniqueness of Paradise, the salvation and bliss of all.”<sup>31</sup>

The existence of hell is also an act of God’s mercy, however strange this may sound. God allows us to act upon our free will. The old Adam is still alive, so he can choose to live in Christ. Our Lord allows evil to exist in this world and within us (as He allows hell to exist) in order that we may continue our freely-chosen existence. St. John Chrysostom reminds us, “*God can do anything except force us to be saved.*” This means that we may remain in a state of hell even during our earthly existence, half-dead, half-alive, until we are willing to share in the fullness of God’s life. Even on earth, our sins can plunge us into a weakened perception of hell (weaker because our fleshly life buffers the soul’s perception). Likewise, love for God and our neighbor can give us a foretaste of heaven. In our spiritual life on earth we are still struggling, “*... we are only perfecting ourselves, being led out of hell by God now, but not yet completely taken out. That is why we cannot fully understand how the existence of hell is compatible with its destruction, and God’s justice ... is compatible with God’s all-mercifulness.*”<sup>32</sup>

RTE: In Orthodoxy, how does one reconcile the “harrowing of Hell,” God’s act of infinite mercy, with His justice?

IRINA: The harrowing of hell offers hope, joy, and freedom from fear, but first of all, it speaks of Christ as our Redeemer and Healer. However, I should mention here that in Orthodoxy the word Redeemer does not have the legalistic overtones we may find in Catholic teaching. The Orthodox Church does not speak of God requiring satisfaction to forgive the sin of Adam.

Without diminishing the importance of God’s justice and righteousness, which must be fulfilled, Orthodoxy places at the centre of its soteriological teaching the love of God, Who did not spare His own Son for the sake of the salvation of the world and as the means of its deification. The Incarnation of God, which took place in order to redeem fallen man and reconcile him with God, is perceived in Orthodoxy, above all, in its general and independent sense: the potential deification of man and communication to him of the Divine life.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Karsavin, L., *On Person*, p. 226.

<sup>32</sup> Karsavin, L., *On Person*, p. 225.

<sup>33</sup> Rev. Sergii Bulgakov, *Pravoslavie. Ocherki Ucheniya Pravoslavnoi Zerkvi*, Paris: 1964. The quotation is taken from the paper presented by the monk Savva (Tutunov), “*O Nekotorikh Aspektakh Rimsko-Katolicheskoi Soteriologii.*” It can be found at [http://www.uchkom.ru/reg/09102001\\_savvadok.htm](http://www.uchkom.ru/reg/09102001_savvadok.htm)

In Syriac theology it is said that Christ has paid a ransom for Adam and his sin. In his *Nisibene Hymn 36*, St. Ephrem describes the scene when Christ came down to Sheol to seek Adam, and Death speaks with Christ, saying that there is no substitute for Adam who is a debtor to Death and Sheol. (So, it is not God who demands recompense, but Death, which is quite noteworthy).

In 36:2, Death says to Christ:

And if you are the one who seeks Adam, then come here. Because of his debts<sup>34</sup> he was imprisoned here. Cherubim and Seraphim cannot be payers on his behalf, for there is no mortal among them, who could give himself for his [Adam's] sake. Who will open the mouth of Sheol and plunge and go up from there; from the one who had swallowed and hidden him forever?

Death demands proof from Jesus that He is able to pay for Adam. When His Resurrection begins and the angels enter Sheol, Death wants to avoid further trouble and in 36:15 thinks to himself:

I will ask him and persuade him to take his hostage,<sup>35</sup> to raise up and go off to his kingdom.

Then in 36:17, Death implores Christ to take Adam (now Christ's hostage) with Him:

King Jesus, receive my request,  
and with my request, take your hostage,  
carry off your great hostage, Adam,  
in whom all the dead are hidden.

We see here that Christ comes to liberate Adam from the sin that held him in captivity as the prisoner of Death. With Adam "in whom all the dead are hidden," Christ has redeemed us also from the power of sin and death. Being saved by Christ does not mean that we now have no responsibility for our sins before God, but rather, it means that sin and death no longer hold absolute power over us. They have been conquered. In the *Acts of Thomas*,

<sup>34</sup> This word also means sin and is used in the Jesus' prayer in Syriac, which may be also understood as : And forgive us our debts (sins) as we forgive our debtors (i.e. those who sin against us)." Due to this feature, there is a play on the meaning in Syriac literature. Here, In St. Ephrem's hymn it means that Adam has sinned and thus became a debtor to Death. It is only Christ who can free Adam from his imprisonment.

<sup>35</sup> from Greek μηροξ.



The Lord's tomb, Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem.

another ancient writing that mentions the descent of Christ into Sheol, it is said that Christ has trod the path to heaven, or more correctly, to Paradise. This is exactly the path that He has opened for us, that we can follow now.

This is the path out of Sheol into heaven, towards God's healing and accepting love. In his *Homily on Our Lord*, there are some wonderful lines where St. Ephrem compares the Cross of Christ's passion to a bridge stretched over the realm of death so that the souls can cross over to the realm of life, that is, Paradise:

This is the skillful Son of the carpenter who put up a cross over Sheol that swallows all. And He led<sup>36</sup> humanity over to the realm of Life. While through the Tree<sup>37</sup> humanity fell inside of Sheol, over the Tree [of the cross] it crossed to the realm of Life. Thus, through the Tree, through which was tasted the bitterness, was tasted the sweetness. So that we could recognize the One to whom there is no adversary in His creation. To You is the glory Who put His cross as a bridge over Death, so that the souls could pass over it from the realm of the dead to the realm of the living.

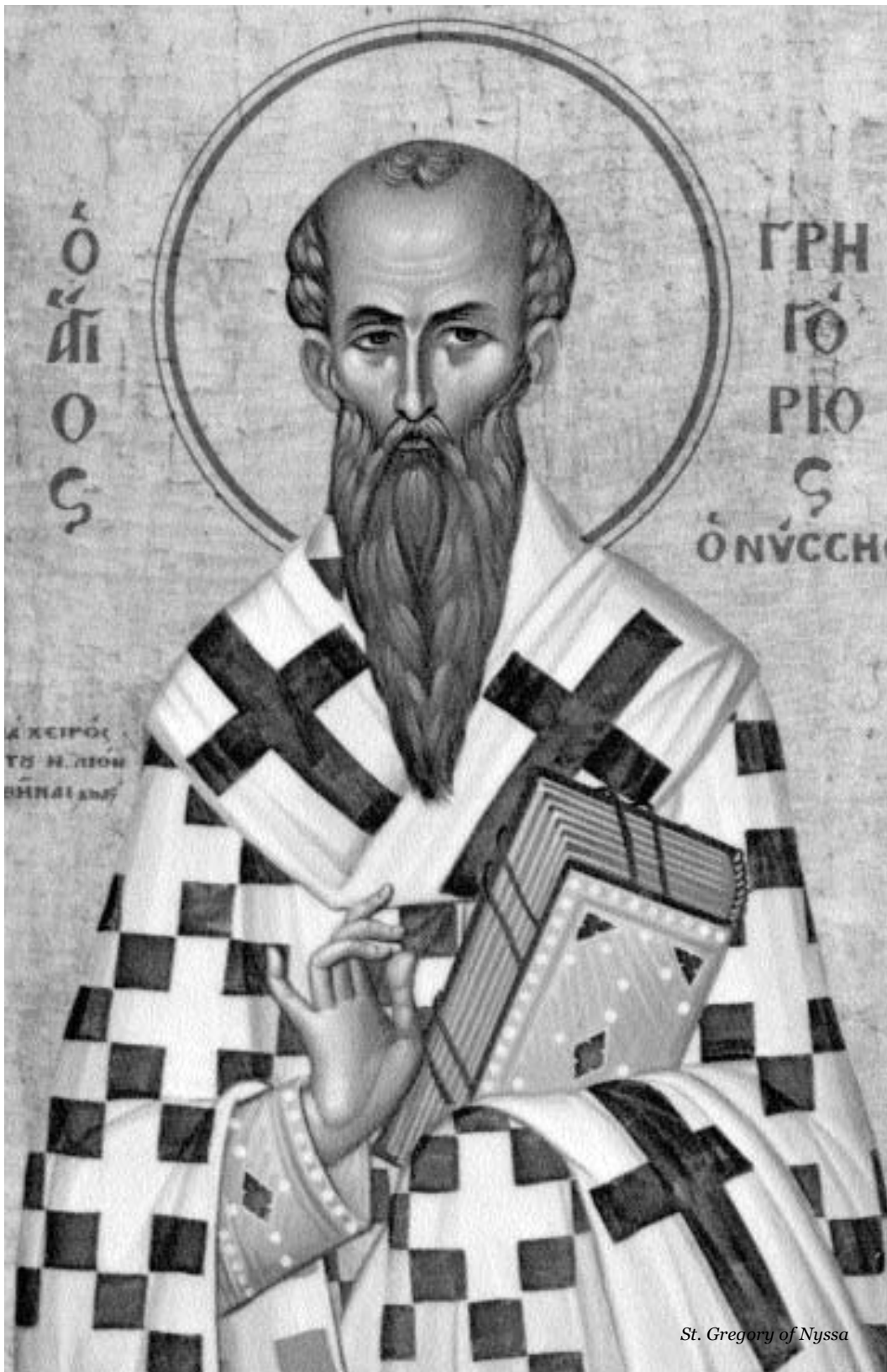
If, however, we continue to reject God, then our state of being and our stay in Sheol is perpetuated. In this case, it seems to me personally, it becomes endless and ever turning in upon itself. This is what Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh calls "the vicious circle of endlessness."<sup>38</sup> (As he himself explains, endlessness here is different from eternity. It means disintegration and decay without the possibility of ever escaping them, an endlessly living death). Christ liberates us not from our physical death but from the death of our spirit, caused by Adam's transgression. Philoxenos of Mabbug (485-523), a Syrian Orthodox bishop and an outstanding theologian in his *Ten Discourses against Habib* wrote that death was destroyed by death and not by resurrection, which was only the revelation of that victory. To me this statement is very illuminating, and it clarifies why in our *troparion* we sing about Christ who has "risen from the death trampling down death by death." For this reason Christ is also called a guest "in the tomb."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> This verb in Syriac has the meaning of to pass over; remit transgressions; to transfer; to transplant; to cause to pass; allow to pass or depart.

<sup>37</sup> The tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Paradise.

<sup>38</sup> Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, "On Death" in *Sobornost* 1/2 (1979), p. 13.

<sup>39</sup> In the East there was a distinction between the guest who stayed for up to three days and someone who stayed on for four days or more, which implied either permanent residence or just abuse of hospitality on the guest's part.



St. Gregory of Nyssa

In sinning we doom ourselves to never-ending suffering and to great grief, for sin is a distortion of God's image within us. However, the main thing to remember is that when, in the course of our earthly life, we grieve over our sins and repent of them, God grieves with us, and sends consolation if we attempt to find a way out of our sinfulness.

The road to healing and restoration lies through our repentance. This means that we should not abuse the sacrament of Confession. Some people have the attitude that that they are mechanically cleansed in confession and afterwards can continue sinning, but real repentance is a process, sometimes a long process, of healing, which means we should strive to deal with the roots of our sins instead of cultivating them.

This emphasis on deep repentance was very evident in ancient Ireland, where people could confess the same sin several times to their priest (who was called an *anamchara*: a friend, a concomitant) if they were tormented by it. This practice no longer exists in our churches, but it seems at the time to have been an extremely healing thing, particularly if the person repenting had committed a grave sin. If the awareness of a past sin troubled the person, he or she could confess it to the priest until they felt they had been healed.

We usually read that Christ by His Resurrection conquered death and extended His liberating power to the kingdom of the dead. The western teaching on the harrowing of hell developed into an explanation of how those righteous people who lived before the incarnation were redeemed.<sup>40</sup> The ancient Syriac tradition went further, however, and celebrated the descent of Christ into Sheol as an event of universal significance. It says that Christ has taken all those who belonged to Him and Adam, the first man. Again, in ancient Syriac and Hebrew the name "Adam" also serves as the designation of the whole of humanity; all of us together, but also each one in particular. Some Christian authors say that the descent of Christ into Sheol is not only an event of the past but continues into subsequent generations. For me, this serves as an indication that, potentially, all of us are saved. But it depends upon our free will whether we choose to be saved and accept Christ's free gift or not.

Here, I would like to cite some verses from St. Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymn*, where St. Ephrem speaks about how Christ entered Sheol and freed its captives (that is, the dead):

<sup>40</sup> Trumbower J., *Rescue for the Dead. The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity*, Oxford: 2001, p. 154-5.

36:11

Dizziness seized hold of Death and Sheol; where light  
Had never been seen, lightning flashed out from the angels who had  
entered  
And took out  
The dead to meet the Dead One who has given life to all.

36:15

Death saw angels in Sheol,  
Immortal beings instead of mortal ones,  
And he said: Confusion has entered our abode  
Two things are torment to me:  
The dead have left Sheol, and the angels who are not going to die  
Have entered it.

In *Hymn 38:1*, Death says:

Every man is afraid of me alone. I was afraid of none,  
Fear and anxiety among the living,  
Peace and quiet among the dead,  
Through a murdered man, captivity entered Sheol<sup>41</sup>  
I have caught everyone. But a captive, whom I have caught  
Has captured me!<sup>42</sup>  
And He led His captivity away and went into Paradise!<sup>43</sup>

For St. John Chrysostom in his *Paschal Homily*, the harrowing of hell was a paradox that was an essential part of the Christian mystery of faith:

Hell took a body, and discovered God; it took earth, and encountered  
heaven. It took what it saw, and was overcome by what it did not see.

RTE: Irina, would you sum up for us the most accessible and valuable fruit of the Syriac Fathers' emphasis on the descent into hell?

IRINA: Yes. St. Isaac the Syrian says, "It is not [the way of] the compassionate Maker to create rational beings in order to deliver them over merciless-

<sup>41</sup> The dead were thought to be the prisoners, the captives, of Sheol, who had been captured by Death. Here, Jesus is seen as the one who liberates prisoners from their captivity.

<sup>42</sup> Play on words.

<sup>43</sup> See *Eph 4: 7-10* and *Ps 67:19*.

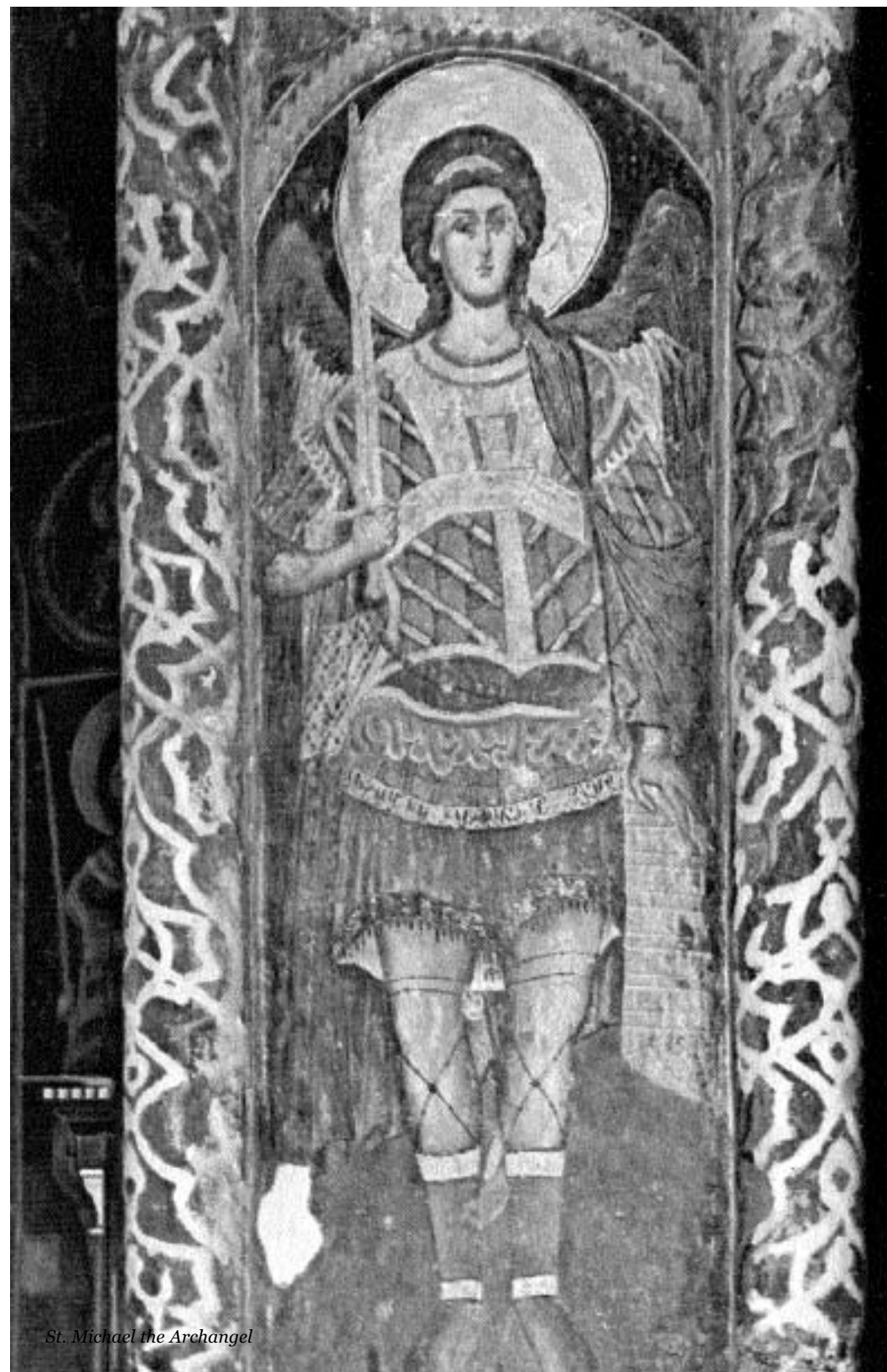
ly to unending affliction.”<sup>44</sup> The focus of Christianity is on eternal life, not punishment after death. St. John Chrysostom reminds us: “We must not ask where hell is, but how we are to escape it.”<sup>45</sup> Christianity is all about life and truth, it is not a religion of punishment or revenge. The aim of Christianity is not to turn us into a pack of neurotics but to make us children of God. I would even dare say that it is blasphemous to meditate only on the punishment of sinners. This narrow focus tremendously damages our relationship to God and hinders our free and loving response to God’s love, which turns us to repentance and healing. Such a view causes us to fall into the sin of judging and condemning our brothers. God is our Father, not an abstract inhuman idol, which indicates that He cares about His creation. In sending His Son He showed to the world that His aim is not to destroy the creation but to heal and restore it.

In Eastern Christian traditions (both Eastern Orthodoxy and Oriental Orthodoxy), hell is not seen as a legalistic punishment meted out by an angry and vengeful God for a slight against a set of spiritual rules. Instead, it describes a state of separation from God, a state into which all humans are born, but against which Christ is “the Mediator,” “the Great Physician,” “the Medicine of Life.”

Sin is not a legalistic notion. Sin is a wound. A wound that hurts and bleeds. It seems to me that if we must have a definition of sin, then it is what distorts and severs the bond of love, whether divine or human. Sin also darkens our idea of God, causing us to see Him as a vindictive judge and to fear punishment and retribution from Him. But in Mt. 9:12-13, Jesus replies to the Pharisees: “*It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick.*” And then He continues: *Go and learn the meaning of the words: Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice* (Hos. 6:6). *And indeed I came to call not the upright, but sinners.*” What we should concentrate upon is not the way in which He will avenge our sins, for He is the God who saves, but to strive to keep this bond of personal love for God that allows us to address Him as “*Abba, Father.*” ✦

44 Brock, S., *Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian): “The Second Part,” Chapters IV-XLI*, (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 555), Louvain: 1995, Homily 39:6, p. 165.

45 *In Romans*, P.G., vol. 60, col. 674



St. Michael the Archangel